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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001540

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STATE FOR SA/INS  
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TAGS: [PGOV CE](#)

SUBJECT: NOW MORE THAN EVER: SLFP OFFICIAL INDICATES PARTY  
COUNTING ON JVP ELECTORAL SUPPORT

REF: COLOMBO 1508

Classified By: Charge' d'Affaires, a.i. James F. Entwistle. Reason: 1  
.4 (b,d).

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SUMMARY  
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11. (C) Still unsure of either the election date or whether it can count on support from its former coalition partner, the Sinhalese nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), President Chandrika Kumaratunga's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) will kick off its hurried presidential campaign with a September 6 convention, which organizers hope will draw "lakhs and lakhs" of the party faithful from across the island to the capital. The convention, which the President is expected to attend, could provide the first indication of how much public support Kumaratunga plans to offer nominee Mahinda Rajapakse's campaign. An August 31 discussion with the SLFP's Executive Director indicates that the party has apparently done little to revamp its structure and build up its grass-roots organization since the April 2004 general elections and is clearly counting on the popular support from JVP voters. Unable to claim success on the economic front, the SLFP may try to campaign on its record on the peace process--a tactic that is certain to alienate JVP sympathizers while furnishing the opposition United National Party (UNP) ample grounds for criticism. End summary.

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SLFP ELECTION CAMPAIGN:  
BIG BLUE (SLOWLY) GEARING UP  
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12. (U) The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) will kick off its presidential election campaign on September 6 with a party convention that will include the formal nomination of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse as its candidate and the unveiling of the official SLFP manifesto. (Note: The actual date of the election has still not been announced, but it must take place before November 22.) SLFP Executive Director Cecil Bandara Seneviratne told poloff August 31 that the party is expecting "lakhs and lakhs" of its 1.4 million official members to converge on the capital from all over the island for the event. SLFP-affiliated trade unions, students and professional associations will march through the city in the afternoon, ending up at a public racecourse for a rally and Rajapakse's official introduction to "the masses" as the party's candidate. President Chandrika Kumaratunga is expected to participate in the event, Seneviratne said.

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THE JVP "HAVE TO COME WITH US"  
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13. (SBU) Dismissing reports that the Sinhalese nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) may run its own candidate (Reftel), Seneviratne asserted, "They have to come with us" or risk an embarrassingly poor showing at the polls. (Note: The JVP's website on September 1 seemed to indicate an agreement was imminent, describing its talks with Rajapakse as "successful" and claiming that he has already agreed to 11 of the 12 points under discussion. We have not confirmed this report with the SLFP.) The JVP's core support base has been eroded by the former Marxists' failure to deliver on populist campaign promises made before the 2004 general elections, Seneviratne claimed. In addition, some former JVP ministers were already regretting their party's "hasty decision" to quit the alliance in June, he maintained.

14. (SBU) Moreover, based on results from presidential, general and provincial elections since 1994, the SLFP can count on a core vote of between 2.5 - 3 million, Seneviratne said; the JVP, on the other hand, has never exceeded the 800,000 it received when it ran alone in the 2001 general elections. (Note: In 1999, the last presidential election it contested, the JVP won only .04 percent of the vote. This is the same amount captured by every third-party candidate since 1982. It is hard to say how much of the popular vote the hard-working but ever-contentious JVP now commands. General assessments put its 2004 strength at about

800,000-900,000 of Sri Lanka's 14 million registered voters. End note.) Seneviratne stressed that the combined vote tally gleaned by the JVP and People's Alliance (of which the SLFP makes up the lion's share) together has either outstripped or nearly equaled (in the 2001 general election) the total reaped by the opposition United National Party (UNP) in every general, presidential and provincial election since 1994. Acknowledging that the upcoming presidential race will likely be close (and thus, JVP support more crucial than ever), Seneviratne reported that the SLFP had commissioned "an independent study" that showed "the PM (Rajapakse) is in the forefront."

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PARTY MACHINERY:  
OVERHAUL STILL PENDING  
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15. (SBU) The SLFP had been unpleasantly surprised by how well its JVP coalition partner had done in the 2004 general elections, Seneviratne conceded, and realized a complete overhaul of the party bureaucracy and machinery was in order. "The JVP is not lazy like the SLFP," he added frankly. In addition, the former revolutionaries, unlike their more complacent SLFP counterparts, include extremely talented, "effective and enthusiastic speakers." The SLFP, in contrast, failed to cultivate a similar cadre of rabble-rousing, crowd-pleasing orators, he noted, "like we had in the past." Seneviratne's Executive Director position was specially created by President Kumaratunga, the party leader, as a first step, and he has been working ever since on a plan to restructure the party's organization and upgrade its grass-roots networks. The effort, however, appears not to have progressed so far past the theoretical stage, and the Supreme Court's "surprise" decision that presidential elections must take place this year has suspended the initiative for now, Seneviratne indicated.

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PEACE PROCESS AND POPULISM KEY PLANKS IN PLATFORM  
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16. (SBU) Indicating a sheaf of papers, Seneviratne said he was still working on the party manifesto, due to be unveiled at the September 6 convention. The manifesto will reflect the President's position on the peace process, he averred; there can be no back-tracking or concession to the JVP on this. "Otherwise, what did she lose an eye for?" While Rajapakse may "discuss" the controversial plan to coordinate tsunami aid (now known as P-TOMS), with the Liberation Tigers

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of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Seneviratne conceded, the aspiring candidate could never agree to jettison completely the proposal. Moreover, SLFP strategists have determined their candidate must win at least 21 percent of the minority (Tamil and Muslim) vote in order to prevail--another reason to highlight the peace process. Seneviratne noted that Rajapakse has decided to "have a dialogue" with Ceylon Workers Congress leader A. Thondaman and Sri Lanka Muslim Congress Leader Rauff Hakeem to this end.

17. (SBU) Asked where he thought the UNP would attempt to attack the SLFP's record in office, Seneviratne responded that his party could be vulnerable on the issue of corruption. He hastily added, however, that corruption was not party policy and that the UNP should thus confine its attacks on the subject to particular individuals. "As a party, we have not done anything wrong," he stipulated. He acknowledged as well that the UNP would likely target the incumbent SLFP on the rising cost-of-living. When asked if the SLFP were contemplating any pre-electoral subsidies or other price-plunging schemes in the near term, Seneviratne retorted that his party would never resort to such "cheap political tricks." In the same breath he noted, however, that "we have shifted the VAT and brought down the price of essential food items" and other commodities. He added that the government has instructed the Ministry of Samurdhi (a social welfare program) to use up all of the nearly USD 3 million allocated by Parliament for such people-friendly projects as vocational education, roads, and rural industries/employment by December 31. (Note: Another Samurdhi program the Government is now promoting provides individual loans of up to about USD 1,000 at 18 percent interest, of which 4 percent is subsidized by the Government.)

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COMMENT

18. (C) The SLFP may be hoping to highlight its role in the peace process as the centerpiece of its campaign; unfortunately, however, after 10 years of an SLFP presidency, there is little the party can claim in the way of lasting success. Indeed, the current situation--the P-TOMS hopelessly stalled in court and an emergency that targets Tamil suspects--is unlikely to win the SLFP many votes among minority communities. Kumaratunga is the only SLFP President

ever elected; among the party faithful, personal loyalty to her as the clear successor to her parents' political dynasty runs high. The upcoming party convention may provide the first public indication of how vigorously President Kumaratunga plans to campaign for her would-be successor. Ongoing discussions with the JVP--and any substantial concessions Rajapakse may make to secure its backing--could still affect the warmth of her support. But with even the SLFP's chief organizer admitting the race will be close, the former coalition partners need each other now more than ever. Rajapakse will have to strike a very fine balance between getting JVP backing without jeopardizing the President's support.

ENTWISTLE